

Wilson's Creek National Battlefield

Teacher's Guide for Bloody Hill

30 - 45 minutes

If a school group has at least a little bit of time to spend at Bloody Hill, but no member of the Park staff is available to guide the group, perhaps the following four-stop, teacher-lead tour will serve the group's instructional needs. Please read through and become familiar with the materials below. Feel free to pick and chose what appears most relevant or practical for your school group. Enjoy!

After parking, walk past the wayside exhibit and the field piece to your right and start down the trail toward Bloody Hill. Before you get to the trees that cover Bloody Hill today you will see four cannons on your left. Please stop here: this is the first of four stops.

Stop One: Totten's Guns

Field pieces such as these played a crucial role in the Battle of Wilson's Creek. Altogether, 31 six and twelve pound (weight of solid shot fired from each type of gun) cannon were used here:

16 guns with the Federal forces
15 with the combined Confederate and Missouri State Guard (MSG) forces.
(Note: The terms "piece," "cannon," and "gun" were used interchangeably. A "battery" usually consisted of four to six guns.)

The guns located at this first stop represent Captain James Totten's battery. During the desperate fight, sweating crews on both sides loaded and fired their guns as quickly as they could, doing bloody work throughout the battle.

- Early in the battle Captain William Woodruff's Pulaski Arkansas Battery of four guns used a hail of case shot and shell fire to slow General Lyon's army as they swept Southern forces off Bloody Hill. Meanwhile, below the hill, General Sterling Price became busy regrouping both these panicked troops as well as other Missouri State Guard forces in the creek valley and sending them up the hill to do battle with the Federals for the next three and a half hours.
- Elsewhere, about a mile south of Bloody Hill, Union Colonel Franz Sigel successfully used artillery fire to drive off the Southerner cavalry in front of him before taking his final position astride the Wire Road.
- After protecting Lyon's left flank (side) on Bloody Hill Lt. John Du Bois's Union Battery turned back confederate forces in Ray's cornfield across Wilson's Creek and left the field "black with their dead" wounding and killing so many that it seemed as if "everything was covered in blood."
- The only significant Confederate cavalry charge during the battle was stopped in its tracks by Du Bois and Totten's guns coupled with musket fire from the First Iowa Infantry. Totten later called this attack upon Lyon's right flank by Greer's Texas Cavalry as "utterly worthless."

Continue along the trail until you reach the edge of the woods. Follow the trail to your left. As it comes out into the open you will see the Lyon Monument. This is your second stop.

Stop Two: Lyon Monument

Memories of war often focus on duty, on the heroic, and on leadership rather than the mind-numbing confusion and chaos of combat. This small monument speaks to two very different aspects of the Battle of Wilson's Creek:

- a) General Lyon's leadership and loss during the battle, and
- b) postwar memories of the battle that were developed and nurtured at the many reunions held here jointly by the veterans of both sides.

The area around you played host to the heaviest fighting during the battle. The lines for both sides ran east and west across the hill and were as close as 30-40 yards apart as the two sides slammed into each other. Imagine the scene: Thousands of men, many in woolen uniforms, fought, suffered and died here in the stifling heat, choked by clouds of gunpowder smoke, and deafened by the roar of musket and artillery fire coupled with the screams of the wounded and dying. Nearly 1500 men were wounded and over 500 were killed in the near vicinity of this monument. The battle of Wilson's Creek ranks 7th among all Civil War battles in percentage of casualties.(The Confederate and Missouri State Guard forces lost 12% while the Union side lost 24%.)

- Rather than direct his army from the rear, General Nathanial Lyon fell back on his experiences as a line officer out West and led the 2nd Kansas directly into the fight. Lyon had already been wounded twice and had one horse shot out from under him before he was killed by the bullet that pierced his chest. One can only wonder how much more effectively Lyon might have commanded his small army had he remained to the rear. But, as with Price, there remains little doubt about Lyon's bravery.
- Lyon was the first Union general to be killed during the Civil War. After his body was left behind twice by the retreating Federal forces (once during the battle and once again in Springfield!), a local woman, Mrs. Mary Phelps, wife of Congressman John Phelps, secretly buried his body in a lead-lined coffin. Shortly thereafter, family members claimed his remains and transported them back to Connecticut for burial.
- In route, Lyon's coffin was brought out at many train stops and used as a recruiting tool. Young men were urged to join up and continue General Lyon's fight to preserve the Union. Considering Lyon's nearly fanatical loyalty to the Union, one might speculate that he would have approved of the use of his remains.

In the years after the war, reunions were often held where thousands of men from both sides gathered with their families on former fields of battle to remember and reflect on their combat experiences. Many Union and Confederate veterans returned to Bloody Hill.

- The two largest reunions were held in 1883 and 1897 though there were several smaller gatherings.
- As its inscription indicates, the Lyon monument (the only monument in the park) was erected in 1928. A few feet beyond Lyon's monument, you can still see the rusted flag stand used when it was dedicated. Ironically, Lyon was probably not killed precisely at this point, but certainly nearby. Nonetheless, his monument calls us to remember his and so many others' sacrifices. But do we remember and reflect on the battle as Lyon experienced it or do we view it through the lenses of present-day politics, mass entertainment, or perhaps our own romantic notions of what war was like? What exactly did those aging veterans remember? Note, for example, the tone of reconciliation embodied in the last few lines engraved on the marker.

Continue on the trail into the woods where it turns to the right. Just beyond a bench to your left, the trail splits. Please take the trail to your left. This trail weaves its way through the trees until it comes out on the southern edge of Bloody Hill. Follow it around to your left until it turns sharply back into the woods. Stop here and look down the creek valley to your right where you can see a small cabin sitting out in the open. This is you third stop.

Stop Three: The Edwards Cabin (General Price's Headquarters)

The Battle of Wilson's Creek affected more than just the soldiers who fought here. While none of the local civilians were wounded or killed during the battle, their lives were deeply touched by what they saw and did during and after the fight here. At the same time their homes and farms became focal points for various aspects of the battle, as with the leadership of General Price.

- To the northeast, over a mile away and across Wilson's Creek, soldiers fought and died in John Ray's cornfield. For a short while, Union artillery fired at the Confederate forces in motion around the Ray home. Surgeons there put up a yellow flag indicating the Ray home served as a field hospital and the Union fire ceased. Those same surgeons did amputations and more in front of the house. After the battle the Ray family, including the youngest children, tended to the wounded and dying for days and weeks after the battle.
- Due North of here beyond the river valley, the Short family lost many of their livestock and stored provisions to the southern troops camped here before the battle. During the battle, they had little choice but to flee the area because of the fighting around them. And below you, General Sterling Price set up his command tent near the Edwards cabin, thus leading the pro-Union Edwards family to seek residence elsewhere. Fortunately for the Southerners, this would place Price at the right place at the right time at the outset of the battle.

Price was eating breakfast near the Edwards cabin when the battle began. He quickly attempted to stop the Missouri State Guardsmen from fleeing before Lyon's army. At this crucial moment, when all might have been lost, Price seized control. By exhibiting this leadership, he made a significant difference in the outcome of the battle.

- Liked and respected by his men, General Price was quickly able to end the "dreadful confusion" among the troops streaming off Bloody Hill, rally these troops to him, and move them back into battle against Lyon's stalled army.
- While both Price and Lyon displayed inspirational courage during the battle, Price's experience as a general officer during the Mexican War prompted him to move from one weak point to the next, calmly directing his men from the rear rather than leading them into combat himself as Lyon did. Lyon, a battle-hardened Mexican War veteran and West Point graduate, didn't lead his soldiers like a general in the rear but more like the captain he had been throughout most of his Army career.
- Even though several bullets pierced his clothing and he was painfully wounded in the side, General Price remained calmly in command. Just before the final phase of the battle, Price told an Arkansas unit to "Keep as cool as the inside of a cucumber and give them thunder." Meanwhile, Major Samuel Sturgis, the Union commander after Lyon's death, taking into account his own dwindling ammunition, his battle losses, and the absence of Colonel Sigel's soldiers, decided he had little choice but to retreat to Springfield. When Price's exhausted Missouri State Guardsmen finally succeeded in cresting the hill, they found the Federals gone, a field strewn with dead and wounded, and themselves the victors. And, as the old saying goes, "to the victor goes the spoils." In this instance, it meant they were the ones left with the task of burying over 500 dead men already decomposing in the August heat!

Head back up the same trail that brought you to this point. Keep left at the trail intersection that leads back to the Lyon monument, and follow the trail north until you reach the large sinkhole on your left. This is your 4th stop.

Stop Four: the Sink Hole

Over thirty of the Union men who died during the battle of Wilson's Creek were buried in this naturally occurring depression called a "sink hole." During the American Civil War, as in earlier wars, it was the responsibility of the army in possession of the field to bury all of the dead after a battle. Thus, on the furnace-like afternoon of 10 August, 1861, the Southerners began burying both their own dead and Union dead as quickly as they could in the oppressive heat.

- Because of the large number of dead during our Civil War's two earliest battles (a much higher number than during our earlier battles and wars) it was considered more expedient to bury men in mass graves such as this sink hole or in dry wells.
- Since soldiers on both sides during the early stages of the Civil War wore no individual identification, such as the now-famous dog tags, too often it would prove nearly impossible to identify their remains later. Understandably, this added to the suffering of their families and friends who were left to wonder what had happened to their loved ones. Beyond a letter of condolence from a superior officer and/ or a friend of the deceased, families received no official report of their individual loss other than lists of names published in the local newspapers.
- In 1867, the battle dead at Wilson's Creek were moved to the National Cemetery in Springfield. For over a century, this was the only national cemetery in the United States to contain both Union and Confederate dead.
- Unfortunately, for the families who remained in the valley of Wilson Creek after the battle, the Southerners' use of sinkholes as well as dry wells for mass burials resulted in the contamination of local ground water. Coupled with the stench of the dead animals and the unburied dead, this area became nearly uninhabitable for weeks and months after the battle had ended. And yet, many locals came out and helped bury the dead as part of their Christian duty.

Follow the trail on past the sinkhole until you reach a "T", take a left and follow the trail back up the hill to the parking lot.

In conclusion, as you leave Bloody Hill, think about what happened here during the battle. In this quiet and peaceful setting, thousands of men engaged in fearful combat and as one veteran recalled, "Some of the best blood in the land was being spilled as recklessly as if it were ditch water." Men from both sides were willing to fight and, if, need be, die for what they believed their duty to be. You might ask members of your group: What would they be willing to make such sacrifices for?